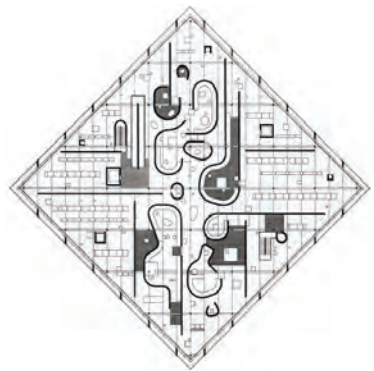


# 13. John Hejduk's Critical and Poetic Architecture



“The Architect is responsible to create the spirit of a thought. And to translate through whatever medium is available a sense of place, whether it be in a text, in a drawing, in a model, in a building, in a photograph, in a film. The Architect concerns himself/herself, with the mysteries of space and of form, and is also obligated to invent new programs. It is essential that the Architect create works that are thought provoking, sense provoking, and ultimately life provoking. Or more precisely, life giving, to what appears to be at first inanimate materials. The Architect enters into the social contract in the deepest sense.”

John Hejduk, *Berlin Night*.<sup>1</sup>

### *Opening*

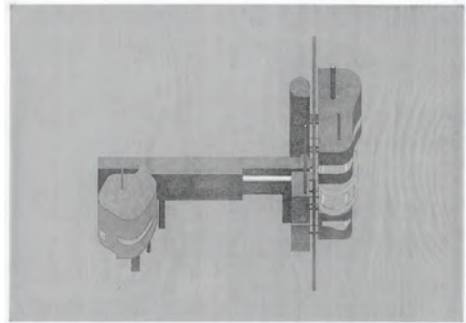
JOHN HEJDUK'S WORK AS AN ARCHITECT, author and teacher is without doubt among the most significant of our time. Modifying from within the terms of a utopic, often mute and senseless modernist architecture, without engaging in futile nostalgic evasions, his works have had a profound influence on architects and educators, particularly on those who, through study or practice, have recognized the crisis of meaning that has afflicted our profession since the nineteenth century.

Hejduk was educated in a totally modern context, belonging in his own words, to a “third generation of modern architects”<sup>2</sup> after the heroic figures of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. The assumption of an “objective” space of precise architectural representation and axonometric projection was a given in the first stages of his career. Following upon the discoveries of Cezanne, Juan Gris, Mondrian and other modern artists, Hejduk soon came to realize the limitations of conceptual space: he valorized the enigmatic depths that became manifest by simply shifting a square plan forty-five degrees, or employing frontal axonometric projections. While always believing, with Alain Robbe-Grillet (writing about Franz Kafka), that

Fig. 13.1 John Hejduk,  
Diamond House (1963-67),  
plan.



Fig. 13.2 Wall House  
(1968-1974), axonometric.



a “hallucinatory effect derives from [the] extraordinary clarity [of objects, gestures, words] and not from mystery or mist [for] nothing is more fantastic ultimately than precision,”<sup>3</sup> he came to understand the limitations of a progressive (instrumental) and optimistic modernity. In his more mature work he acknowledged the central importance of story-telling and poetic language in architectural design.

John Hejduk's work is both critical and poetic, two attributes that can be easily coupled in a sentence, but whose synthesis – a requisite of authentic artistic creation in our times – is immensely difficult to implement. Architects of the late twentieth and

early twenty-first centuries have often attained recognition by adopting one or the other banner: a pseudo-poetic formal language as a sign of “style,” one that may be easily consumed, or a critical stance extrapolated from other disciplines like philosophy, political theory or gender studies, which the public might identify as a correct political position. Hejduk’s work has escaped such deceptive reductions. His architecture is indeed profoundly critical, but the critique is first and foremost a gift of the imagination, luminous and visceral.

Indeed, John Hejduk’s work constitutes a radical criticism of representational clichés, always exploring the expressive potential of architecture beyond the restrictions of ill-conceived categories: drawing, building, book-making, poetry, model-making, photography, are all adequate media for architecture in its widest sense, as a significant human ordering of the world both experienced emotionally and understood cognitively. Yet, his theoretical work, always a personal making, is a paradigm of *téchne-poiesis*, the Greek terms used to define the nature of the work of art as a revelation of what *is*, as an embodiment of human truth. In being poetic in this sense, as a discovery through making, John Hejduk’s work is implicitly critical of the processes of production that tend to reduce architecture to a mere set of signs to be transcribed into a building. Creative translation is always required when shifting media or universes of discourse, when making a “building” from a “drawing,” or architecture from a painting. This act of translation is a poetic operation in its own right, fully engaging a hermeneutic imagination, and never a mere technique or neutral process.

Hejduk’s work is critical also in a more familiar sense. His projects question a naive acceptance of tradition and social practices. The architect’s responsibility is never merely to produce pleasing novel forms or to resolve pragmatic needs; architectural forms embody values and these can often be repressive in our epoch of “incomplete nihilism.” Architecture contributes to social

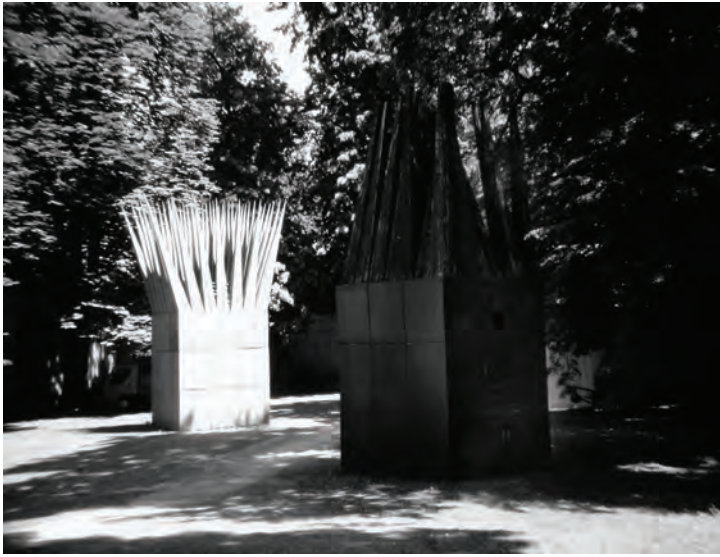


Fig. 13.3 “The House of the Suicide and the Mother of the Suicide,” installed in Prague in honor of Jan Palech.

order and is capable of proposing a framework for poetic inhabitation, not merely reproducing conventions but rather creating possibilities for a more enlightened social fabric. Hejduk's architecture can never be grasped in the simplistic terms of a critique because it is not merely revolutionary: while it destabilizes and wakes us up to our humanity, it always proposes a world. Consequently it can never become “stylish” or “fashionable”.

John Hejduk's architecture never reproduces itself, nor is it a system liable to be imitated by others. His work is therefore dissimilar from the majority of architecture recognized as successful today. Every project, every drawing, every work poses a challenge, asks all the questions, and proposes a new answer. His work has the capacity to bypass the banal intellectualizing discourses of so-called critical theory. It challenges simplistic critical categories because it is immensely imaginative, yet compassionate;

profoundly poetic, yet respectful of its role as a medium for suggesting a “different” social order through the careful rewriting of narratives drawn from our cultural traditions.

John Hejduk’s architecture affirms being and the reality of the human spirit, a rather rare occurrence in our materialistic world. Most importantly, this affirmation is not dogmatic. It is simply a recognition that our continuity as humans hinges on shared questions which must be acknowledged, questions that architecture must address if it is to become meaningful. What is affirmed therefore is not something forever stable and unchanging; rather, the work’s eloquence rests on a recognition of the great void where all things begin, the infinite source of our most intense vibration. Indeed, his work is incandescent, like Rainer Maria Rilke’s crystal cup that shatters even as it rings. It has the power to change our life because it is always new, *and* always familiar. It reveals the coincidence of life and death in our moment of communion with the work, disclosing *both* the absurdity of a nihilism of despair, and the delusion of positive scientific or theological dogmatism.

Hejduk’s work challenges the machine and subjects it to obedience, but it is never historicist or nostalgic. It is a sounding of that which is at hand, our technological world. The threat of a blind technology, that with equal determination may create or destroy, is confronted with existence as a miracle. Technology is destructured through a playing of absolute forces named by words that calmly approach the unsayable, echoing silence yet always inviting dialogue, necessarily completed through the participation and interpretation of the inhabitant, spectator or interlocutor.

Hejduk’s projects, like many great works of the past, are both finished and unfinished. His last utterance invariably has the power to remain fresh and reformulate previous production; the projects keep growing upon previous propositions: his work is a making as self-making, architecture as a verb, a process of

enlightenment that embraces the often forgotten ephemeral nature of our human condition. Passionately engaged and yet detached, this is a work of the personal imagination that is also radically cosmocentric, it is for and about the Other, proposing a world where we all may realize our spiritual wholeness.

The meanings that inhabit the work of John Hejduk are both emotional and cognitive. They are given to experience in the immediate presence of the work, to then further construct poetic images of possible futures and significant memory. They cannot be paraphrased or elucidated, nor conceptualized as something added to the work that we may dissect, that we may reduce to information and then deconstruct. *Meaning inhabits the surface and depth of the work*; it is the medium, the word, the idea, the pencil tracing, and the brush stroke. It speaks directly to our bodily experience, to our heart and our stomach, to our embodied consciousness, which is also universal mind, opaque yet luminous. Our life in John Hejduk's architecture, between dark beginning and beyond, places us in a position to grasp a sense of direction. This is the power of his work to help us question destructive nihilistic assumptions and perhaps recognize our purpose as mortals on earth.

### ***John Hejduk's persona***

John Hejduk was one of those rare individuals who could bare his soul, with all its poetic freshness and naïveté, without ever being vulnerable. The works of a true poet, regardless of his medium, touch us deeply, without sentimentality. Through Hejduk spoke the voices of the world, of a primordial language and an archetypal architecture. He could often see a reality that others couldn't. He remained a child, with the sophistication of a thousand years. And all this was written on his body, expressed through his physiognomy and gestural choreography. John's gaze and words both enabled one to know oneself, allowing for



Fig. 13.4 John Hejduk during a lecture in Prague, September 6th, 1991.

intimate communion, and demanded the acknowledgement of the ineffable other. His presence challenged all contradictions, demonstrating a link with the invisible: a presence luminous and tender, strong and caring, yet unforgiving of those who through a lack of authenticity patronized or produced mediocre work. This presence was always at the beginning of his work, architecture as a verb, a constant search, a way of life. And it remains like an aura surrounding his legacy.

Both his vast production as an architect and author, and his contributions to the teaching of architecture, remain significant for the twenty-first century. At Cooper Union in New York, where he was Dean from 1975-2000, he demonstrated that to learn architecture one should *not* try to emulate practice, but rather follow a poetic curriculum, thoughtfully designed. The work at school, the “process,” is not merely a means towards an end, it is rather a crucial moment in all future architects’ alchemical search for a formula, always personal and ephemeral, to relate ethical thoughts and intentions with poetic action; the words of theories and programs, with resonant architectural forms. Cooper graduates, following Hejduk’s footsteps, have long had a significant impact on our cities, demonstrating their capacity for



historically responsible, significant innovation, while rejecting the lure of fashionable novelty.

As an architect, mostly through his theoretical projects, Hejduk revealed the very origins of architectural meaning. Architecture, like music, is an art of limits, an art of atmospheres that attune inhabitants with their world. It speaks to embodied consciousness, to a fully emotional and multisensory being, and not to a Cartesian mind through some semiotic model. It configures the limits between the world of language and the mute horizon beyond, the ever-present more-than-human world. Architecture doesn't mean "something," like a sentence that can be paraphrased; rather it must overflow with sense, while foregrounding the presence and crucial importance of our limits. The limits configured by architecture both bound and open up the "space" of culture, the world of language and the other iconic arts, operating as a hyphen between the visible and the invisible. John realized that since the long-standing architectural conventions of classicism had been questioned by modernism, the relationships between language (particularly poetry which is by definition language impossible to paraphrase), geometry, a primordial and transhistorical articulation of human order, and architecture, had to be probed. This is the fundamental thrust of his immensely significant and diverse work. In the wake of the crisis of meaning that has afflicted our profession since the nineteenth century, his poetic theoretical projects propose tactics for an architecture that may fulfill its inveterate symbolic task, without reverting to dogmatism or historical pastiche.

Hejduk's drawings and models, his buildings and books, all affirm being and proclaim the reality of the human spirit, a rather rare occurrence in our materialistic world. Most importantly, this affirmation is not dogmatic. It is simply a recognition that our continuity as humans hinges on shared questions which must be acknowledged, questions which inevitably lead us to a mystery, one which should be embraced as such and not

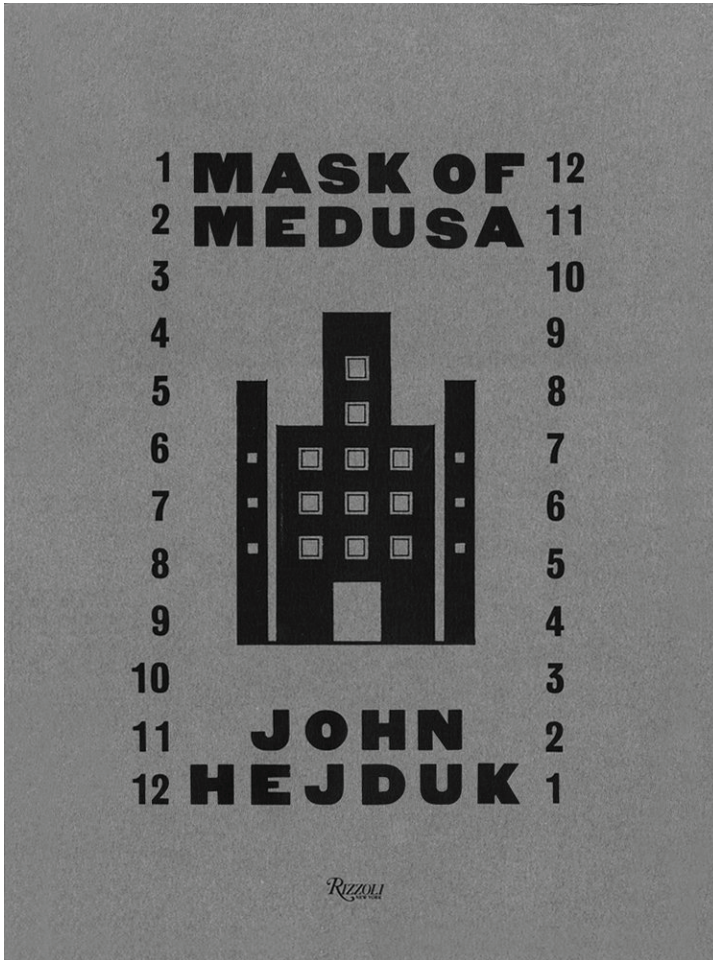


Fig. 13.5 Cover of John Hejduk's *Mask of Medusa*, a retrospective collection of his works published in 1985.

ignored or trivialized. These recurring enigmas make us human, and architecture must address them squarely if it is to disclose a meaningful space for our lives. What is affirmed therefore is not something forever stable and unchanging; rather the work's eloquence rests on a recognition of the great void where all things

begin, the infinite source of our most intense vibration. This void is where the poet's angels live, a void which *is not nothing*. It is the void carefully protected by the rose's petals, the rose of Rainer Maria Rilke's epitaph that reads:

Rose, oh pure contradiction, desire,  
To be no one's sleep under so many  
Lids.

This void is elsewhere, but it is also here, it always qualifies human life; it makes the rose possible, for even in the sweetest wind we breathe parting. Thus the poet's silence becomes eloquence:

Life and death: they are one, at core entwined  
Who understands himself from his own strain  
presses himself into a drop of wine  
and throws himself into the purest flame.  
(R.M. Rilke, 1922; tr. John L. Mood)

### ***The non-dualistic body and the theoretical project***

'The living being had no need of eyes when there was nothing remaining outside him to be seen, nor of ears when there was no surrounding atmosphere to be breathed...it was not necessary to bestow upon him hands, nor had he any need of feet...and he was made to move within his own limits, revolving in a circle.'

Plato<sup>4</sup>

Animal bodies, with their particular psychomotor capacities and morphological configuration, are reciprocally related to their respective worlds; both body and world give shape to their consciousness. The world that appears for a lion is qualitatively different from that of an elephant or an ant,<sup>5</sup> and as such, they are never knowable to humans. For humans, this circular

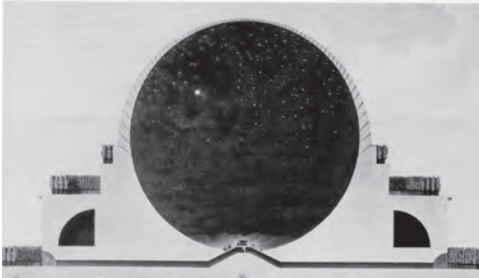


Fig. 13.6 *Cenotaph to Newton*, day view, by Etienne-Louis Boullée.

condition is compounded by our self-conscious body image that always qualifies our perceptual experience, so that the body of acupuncture in Chinese culture, for example, is different from the well-articulated and muscular body of the Western classical tradition.

The body is our undivided possession, which allows access to reality, now understood through phenomenology as embodied consciousness *in* the world. In spite of our still prevalent rational prejudices, body and world remain inextricably and mysteriously related.<sup>6</sup> The world is endowed with meaning in the immediacy of perception, and it is given a physiognomy that derives from the projection of our body image onto it. John Hejduk's architecture speaks and gives voice to a body as it is now understood by phenomenology and recent cognitive science; one that is no longer either the classical body of Greek origin, nor the mechanistic object of Cartesian philosophy.

Postmodern architecture rightly argued that something was missing from the modernist project: most postmodernist arguments in favour of a figural architecture stemmed from a legitimate concern regarding the limitations of invention, imagination and reductive processes. The need for qualitative places for human dwelling, as opposed to the generalized space of modern architecture, became evident. John Hejduk lived through the crisis of modernism in the late 70's and 80's. It is well known

that abstraction is a unique and indispensable tool of modern science, and therefore a dangerous component of technological intentionality.<sup>7</sup> The abstraction of space, when resulting from the reductionist process of planning, has been the main protagonist in the devaluation of the modern city. And yet, Hejduk persevered in his desire to create *another* architecture, resonant with the profound revelations related to painting, music and literature. He was convinced that modern architecture is only now emerging, and the suggestion of authentic meanings for the present and of its potential for the future is striking in buildings such as Le Corbusier's La Tourette, Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium and Villa Mairea, Mies's Barcelona Pavilion or Gaudi's Sagrada Familia. These works address embodied consciousness, a very different "subject" from that of the body in the mechanistic and dualistic tradition of Descartes. The problem of dwelling, formulated by Heidegger in terms of orientation and belonging, had to be reformulated in relation to our present reality – not through a nostalgic recovery of traditional forms and cultural assumptions. *Places* were occulted by the forgetting of traditional narratives and the dominant implementation of conceptual (Cartesian) space; they had to be unveiled through imaginative invention.

Phenomenology has shown the fallacy of assuming that theory and practice (the mind and the body) relate to one another as in a mechanistic diagram.<sup>8</sup> Consciousness is always an embodied consciousness, and the relationship between mind and body is always intrinsic. Theory must provide the words that allow us to ground our architectural work in the totality of our existence, here and now. We think with our hands, with our feet, with our hearts.<sup>9</sup> As Heidegger clearly demonstrated, our historical situation demands that we transcend rational metaphysics, and David Michael Levin has shown that we need to retrieve a new and more radical *experience* of being.<sup>10</sup> Architecture is crucial for this retrieval.

This is precisely the issue in Hejduk's architecture. A critique of the Cartesian body and the suggestion of a recollection of being through embodied consciousness are implicit. The dialectic of his work, dealing with the capacities and limitations of invention and reductive processes on the one hand, and the basis of meaning in language on the other, reveals both the end of classical, cosmocentric, anthropocentric architecture, and the potential for an architecture addressing reality – that is, the continuum body-world. Such a recollection of being in embodied existence is indispensable in order for sense to prevail over nihilism and apocalypse.

While mostly in the form of theoretical projects, in drawings and writing, Hejduk's work avoids both reductionism and nostalgia. His projects belong to a tradition of critical work initiated by Giovanni-Battista Piranesi in the eighteenth century. Piranesi, who produced mostly etchings yet insisted that his work was *architecture*, understood that poetic dwelling could only be proposed for the imagination through the medium of the drawing; in a world where lived space was already identified with a banal third-dimensional Cartesian construct. A few years later, the epistemological transformations at the end of the eighteenth century signalled a split between myth and reason, the start of positivism and scientism, and finally the exclusion of God from 'serious' knowledge. Ritual, traditionally the embodiment of myth as a form of collective belonging, was finally excluded from modern urban life. These forms of public participation were the condition of the effective revelation of 'cosmic place' in the institutions and urban spaces of the city. Facing the profound cultural transformations which made architecture as an act of symbolic ordering practically impossible in the industrialized city after the French Revolution, Etienne-Louis Boullée confessed that his theoretical projects in the form of drawings were his real architecture, rather than his extensive but far less meaningful buildings.<sup>11</sup> The myths supporting classical architecture had been eroded by

reason, and he understood that architecture, to be valid, had to reflect knowledge in its most profound sense: not as information, but as the visible equivalent of metaphysical orientation.

In the context of this tradition, Hejduk's work questions the possibility of its own execution in our world of genetic engineering and cryogenic entombment; in this sense it is exemplary of modern architecture in understanding the modern, not as a style, but as a distinct time and place with a characteristic world view. Octavio Paz has pointed out that after the dissolution of the traditional cosmos in the late eighteenth century any authentic form of poetry must also be criticism. This duality pervades Hejduk's architecture. His projects are a critique of conventional contemporary practice; his architecture can only be experienced on its own terms.

The imperative of efficient technological control has isolated the architect from the act of making. John Hejduk's architecture, from the Diamond Houses to the Masques, can be seen as a devastating criticism of this most serious of all evils, evidently impoverishing the emotional eloquence of urban environments all over the world. His work appears in constructions that exist in the in-between realm, recovering the always-enigmatic depth which is the first dimension of embodied experience: the depth that appears in the frontal axonometric projections of the Bernstein House, for example, or its final collapse into the diagonal of the square: "the practically non-existent space between a mask and a face."<sup>12</sup> This is a concrete architecture that resists any attempt to place it as an object among others in Cartesian space. Hejduk's architecture transcends the classical distinction between craftsman and architect, to recover the archaic horizon of *téchne-poíesis*. His work finds the archetypal by means of the personal, the eternal by means of the present. It can be perceived only in its own terms, in a realm of perception that is no longer regulated by the Cartesian coordinates of a perspectival world. Thus Hejduk's architecture makes possible the body's recollection

of being though its proposition of atmospheres, between drawing and literary text.

Indeed, while Hejduk's earlier work seemed closer to the interest in abstraction of the heroic age of modern architecture, his later projects, loosely grouped as "masques," have emphasized their search for figuration through colour, texture and, most significantly, literary language. While eminently a *personal* task, the architect must discover order that transcends historical styles, meaningless technological processes, or the hedonism of empty form.

Hejduk's work always refers to the world-as-lived, our primary source of meaning. He uses literary language in his late work to search for a figural ground and to tie his concrete poetry of invention to the continuum of history and a social contract. Since the time of Boullée it has become clear that the formulation of architectural intentions in the universe of intellectual discourse can no longer be scientific prose, but poetry. The literary imagination has replaced the old metaphors that provided the invisible structure for meaningful architectural order since classical Greece. From Vitruvius until the late seventeenth century, the scientific prose of the treatises disclosed the principles and precepts (*mathémata*) derived from these metaphors and from the myths that sustained them. Once the cosmos was shattered and man's world view became the void of a technological utopia, the most enlightened architects have attempted to recover the transcendental (semantic) dimension of meaning through the use of poetic texts.

The dialectic of modern architecture exemplified by Hejduk's work has oscillated between silence and the word, recognizing the limitations implicit in the nature of an architectural universe of discourse, no longer predicated on the assumption of an ordered cosmos. Between *poíesis* as making and poetic truth coined in language, Hejduk's architecture developed during forty years of intense dialogue. On both levels, it posited the recovery



of the poetic as the origin of dwelling. Man's existential condition demands that he be a poet first of all, and only secondly a scientist. Emerging language is polysemic, poetic language, only forced to be indicative with considerable violence. In *Phaedrus*, Plato displays an awareness that words can be evil, becoming 'an elixir not of memory, but of reminding'. On the other hand, Heidegger has clearly explained how 'language is the house of Being',<sup>13</sup> and Paul Ricoeur has elaborated the notion that there is no symbolism before man speaks, 'even if the power of symbol is rooted much deeper'.<sup>14</sup> Everything that is, is known through language.

Poetic speech is much more than a mode of communication among other modes of equal value. Aristotle recognized the primary role of metaphor. In his *Rhetoric*, he postulates metaphor as the fundamental figure of speech in prose, essential to communication, while in the *Poetics*, metaphor constitutes the essential aspect of tragedy, and is seen as the vehicle for *mimesis*, allowing the work of art to become an effective microcosm in which spectators apprehend their 'place' in the face of destiny. Acknowledging the ambiguity of the human condition, poetic speech embodies the necessity of displacement, allowing for indirect reference to the primordial, and is therefore the only language which reveals reality. Indicative (scientific) language, on the other hand, considered today the exclusive means of communicating truth and objectivity, rests on the illusion of reductionism and assumes a direct and unambiguous relationship between the human mind and the material world. All human knowledge is conditioned by interpretation, and its actual meaning must derive from its ability to orient man in view of an eschatological, ambiguous horizon.

Hejduk's architecture is true knowledge in precisely this sense. His *masques* have a density and grounding that his earlier work seemed to lack. Through poetic speech, the architecture attains an unfathomable concreteness. The word allows the architect to reveal the ground of the 'thing', of the products of *poiesis*,

and to attain archetypal meanings; thus the abstract becomes concrete and the figural is regained, bridging the divide between the paradigms of meaning embodied in abstract and surreal art: the beacons of modernity's avant-garde. Without renouncing the personal power of the modern architect to discover essential, abstract geometrical orders through making, the masques suggest their potential inhabitation, the primary role of architecture as the *place* of meaningful focal actions: a reinvention of ritual as a primordial round-dance, addressing the necessity of universality in meaning. Through poetic language, Hejduk's late architecture is inhabited with all the dreams and fears of modern man. Poetry speaks in images in order to let us dwell, states Heidegger. Hejduk's vision does just that: it provides existential orientation reflecting the structure of the world and suggesting the presence of Being.

Hejduk's architecture has posited technique once again as a magical, propitiatory act. His objects, like the *daídala* in Homeric literature, convey fear and admiration through their metaphysical light. The protagonists of the masques have a mysterious emanation of being, a seductive power that can create dangerous illusions. Rather than representing that which is alive, pre-classical *daídala* allowed inanimate matter magically to become alive. Like Hejduk's architecture, they were *tháumata*, marvelous animated machines with brilliant suits of amour and scintillating eyes.<sup>15</sup> This architecture is the *mímesis* of a transcendental emotion. It discloses the possible totality through the fragment.

Hejduk's architecture of objects in drawing or construction is complemented by an architecture of spatial qualities realized through the word. Together, both dimensions provide existential identification and orientation. His architecture is universal and impenetrable. It attains meaning, in the Heideggerian sense, by being suspended 'outside' the world of contemporary buildings and sites, always in waiting. In *Victims*, Hejduk has told us, it is only the sign naming the sign that can exist; there is no hidden

symbolic intention on the part of the author. This reminds us of the great filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky when he states: “in my movies when it rains, it simply rains.” On the other hand, when the architect names his archetypes, he allows language to speak, respecting its existential function, and the architecture becomes fully accessible. Thus a concrete poetry emerges, a reinvention of history – Hejduk's *storia* – for the future.

### *Victims*

I would now like to examine more closely a work by John Hejduk in which poetic language serves the architect, disclosing the meanings of his site as *place*, and projecting its possibilities into the future by means of literary configuration. Hejduk's work is complex; like much excellent poetry it draws from multiple and deep life experiences to speak not about itself (or the author), but about the world, often defying paraphrase. Here I wish to offer only a few observations on his project entitled *Victims*, a proposal for a barren site in Berlin that used to house the

Fig. 13.7 The “Topography of Terror” museum in Berlin.



headquarters and torture chambers of the Nazi SS and the Gestapo – a site marked and cursed by the stories of all the atrocities that took place during the Third Reich.<sup>16</sup> Today the site, known as the “Topography of Terror” museum, houses a rather banal, functional documentation centre and features a few remnants of existing structures (most of them were demolished during and after the war), as well as a fragment of the Berlin Wall bounding its north side. The present project was built after a complicated sequence of competitions that included the infamous failure of Peter Zumthor’s winning project, arrested and demolished in 2004, officially due to cost overruns. Compared with the existing museum that objectifies the site in its past horror, Hejduk’s project was not concerned with preserving and documenting physical remnants; it has no didactic aspirations and does not feature an objectified memory for selective consumption. The conventional museum exposes documents to a passive visitor who, dumbfounded by the atrocities orchestrated by the Nazi state apparatus, usually exits hurriedly in search of a stiff drink, thus perpetuating the paradox of either resentful memory or guiltful forgetting. Hejduk’s project aimed instead at involving the inhabitants and visitors in a process of remembering that is also a process of healing, through settings for participatory focal actions that bridge normally opposed dimensions of experience: linking the quotidian with the extraordinary, the past with the future in a thick present, angelic play with demonic action, the city and the garden with the concentration camp. The site, a marginal and devastated plot of land after the war, long perceived as a no-place, is obviously loaded with negative meanings. The challenge for Hejduk was to acknowledge them by charging Berliners with the role of caretakers of memories that included also other “victims” of torture and technological warfare elsewhere in the world, acknowledging both the particularities of the situation and the wider universal issues of human violence to others, and its potential catharsis.



The project consists of 67 structures presented to the City and its citizens that might be built over two thirty-year periods, wholly or selectively, or even may not be built at all – he writes – as the site gradually becomes transfigured into an enclosed garden of evergreen saplings on a tight grid.<sup>17</sup> Each structure is *named* and characterized through drawings and words. A set of precise plans, elevations, and sections (whenever necessary), systematically descriptive through the three orthogonal directions, are entwined with a story or stories, usually the description of a potential inhabitant (some biographical traits or anecdotes), and/or his or her activities. The structures on the site are connected consistently one to the next, touching each other at a single point. The drawings are clearly referential: a means to the end of an imagined building, yet in conjunction with their texts. These narratives are written in the “objective” manner of Robbe-Grillet: avoiding subjective emotional qualifications, they generate poetic images and above all the experience of attunement between environment and task, action and habit; in doing this they recall rituals from the past, usually engaging the ineffable. Hopeful atmospheres appear in-between drawings and narrative: on the one hand the precise images which are never merely “novel” but rather generated from recognizable Euclidean figures drawn from our architectural, urban and landscape traditions; and on the other, the words that characterize actions or habits. Such atmospheres charged with meaning concern action and the habitual; they cannot be perceived from the detached position of a museum visitor.

Hejduk reminds us that, in the end, there are only a handful of basic interventions: a double hedge (to grow up to 14 feet) marking the perimeter of the site; a trolley track running between the hedges; telephone poles running along the tracks whose lines serve the park alone (there are no calls beyond the hedges); a bus stop, drawbridge and gate-house marking the only access to the site and flanked by two clock towers (whose blades ironically

conceal the present hour, signaling the exclusion of real presence from any mathematical time); and inside, a grid locating the placement of the evergreen saplings that grow in cycles of 30 years. This is an “incremental place... a growing vision”<sup>18</sup> whose architectural character and atmospheres are defined through the stories of the city’s inhabitants. Thus through poetic language the occulted *places* of a modern metropolis, even when cursed by war and tyranny, may be returned to a meaningful architectural production.

### *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque*

Finally, to underscore the fascinating relationships between architectural drawing and literary language developed by Hejduk, where the word appears as a fundamental tool of architectural representation conducive to attuned atmospheres, I wish to speak briefly of some aspects of his *Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, given final form in a book published in 1992.<sup>19</sup> Like some of the other masques, the *Lancaster/Hanover Masque* proposes new ways of dwelling in society, new urban organizations framed by an appropriate architecture. Taking the “program” as a fundamental part of the project, one that is rendered into literary language, Hejduk’s work also inherits the concerns to contribute to a new “social contract,” first introduced into architecture in the late eighteenth century by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.

In Hejduk’s project the central area of the “farm community” is marked by an open quadrangular space, marked as “Void” by the architect – a “space of appearance” framed by four “houses,” the Court and Prison House and the Church and Death House, and two facing walls with thirteen suspended chairs on them, interweaving the biological and political life (*zoí* and *bíos*) that characterize human settlement. Hejduk thus recovers the understanding of such space of communication as the very essence of the *pólis/civitas*: itself the ground and sufficient precondition of



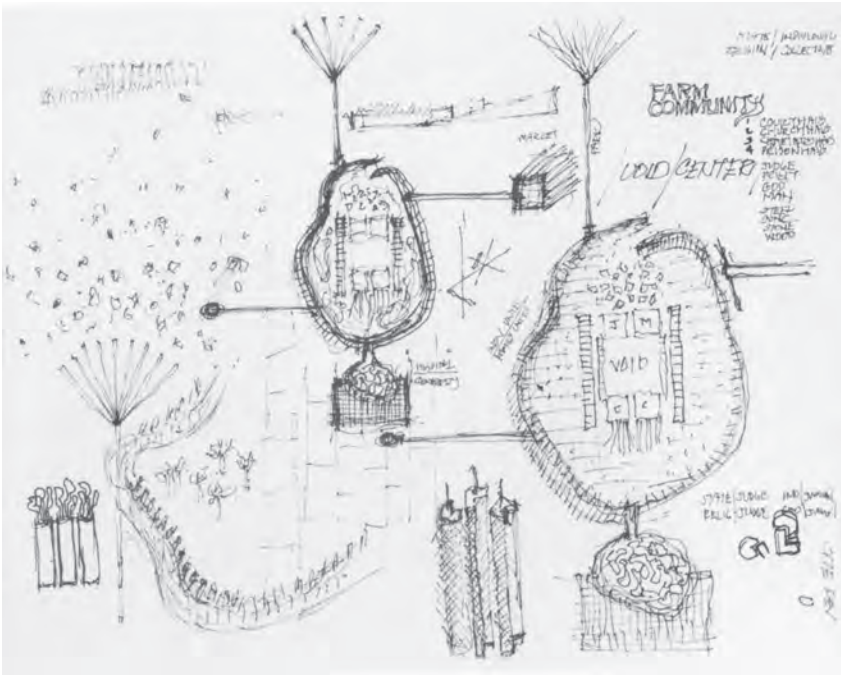


Fig. 13.10 Central Square form.

any further architecture, as had been suggested by Vitruvius.<sup>20</sup> He characterized the drawings for this “kernel” of the city as “x-ray... apparitions... that may seem somewhat ethereal [yet are] in fact absolutely precise: that is, everything drawn is sufficient, no more – no less.”<sup>21</sup>

These remarks come from a short passage entitled “On the Drawings,” where Hejduk (exceptionally) introduces his work and discloses some of the intentions, underscoring his use of literary text and drawings. He points out that the texts of the masque are meant to explain the community’s “functions,” the ritual and theatrical dimension of life, while the “drawing is like a sentence in a text, in which the word is a detail.... a detail that



helps to incorporate a thought.”<sup>22</sup> While Hejduk is referring here to the specific drawing of his Court House project, he believes his drawings for all the 68 structures of the Masque, in many cases enigmatic composites of plan, elevation and section superposed in a single image (never merely conventional, instrumental graphics), “reveal[s] the whole structure... the whole story. It’s life that is there.”<sup>23</sup> It is important to emphasize how Hejduk characterizes the “emergence” of poetic language and drawing as interwoven moments: the drawing is “propositional” – like a sentence, in the terms of Ricoeur previously discussed, the unit of discourse. It “encompasses the whole of a dematerialized thought.”

This Masque, as many of the others in Hejduk’s *oeuvre*, is organized in terms of “objects” and “subjects,” presented as columns on a page, numbered and arranged face to face. The “objects” are architectural structures with names and drawing(s), often described in diverse appropriate terms: from technical specifications, to literary or artistic references (for instance, Edward Hopper’s paintings for the atmosphere of the hotel rooms), to modes of operation (the small Ferris wheel completing a revolution every 24 hours which is “The Time-Keeper’s Place”). To each of these corresponds a “subject,” an inhabitant with a life story expressed in poetic, yet precise language. These are engaged in activities and sometimes in interactions with other “subjects,” often revelatory of human purpose and the spiritual dimensions of the quotidian – for example the citizens who paradoxically become observers participating in the public space, easing themselves into the chairs on the wooden walls to contemplate how “the old cloth of the spinning wheel is placed in the Voided Centre and through age and the normal elements becomes dust.”<sup>24</sup> For Hejduk, architectural meanings are only made manifest through a lived life (action, for which the architect is also accountable). This life is lived in a physical, formal context

framed by the designer, one that may provide the proper attunement between “objects” and “subjects.”

NOTES

John Hejduk, *Berlin Night* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, Netherlands Architecture Institute, 1993), 18.

John Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 26.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 165. The quote is reproduced in *Mask of Medusa*, 39. Hejduk had a framed version of the quote in his office at the Cooper Union School of Architecture in New York.

*Timaeus*, 33A-34a.

See Louise Barrett, *Beyond the Brain, How Body and Environment Shape Animal and Human Brains* (Princeton NJ: Princeton U.P.), 2011.

See, for example, Henry Frankfort, *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore MD: Penguin, 1971), Introduction.

See Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), especially the Introduction and chapters 8 and 9.

This Cartesian assumption is at the root of modern architecture's identification of theory and methodology, and of its concomitant belief that theory had to be validated in terms of its applicability (the obvious failures of Durand's theory). This has entailed the reduction of true theory to the status of applied science, a reduction which was supported by the parameters of a technological world view. This 'theory' is oblivious of myth and true knowledge and is exclusively concerned with an efficient domination of the material world. See: *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, chapters 8 and 9. See also chs. 13 and 14 of vol. 2 in this collection.

See: Stuart F. Spicker, *The Philosophy of the Body*, particularly part IIb.

David Michael Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being* (London, 1985), pp. 45-7.

Etienne-Louis Boullée, *Essai sur l'art* (Paris, 1968). His remarkable watercolours can be viewed at the web site of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*.

This observation was often made by Hejduk in his public lectures, ca. 1985.

M. Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in: *Basic Writings* (New York, 1977), pp. 189ff.

P. Ricoeur, 'Existence and Hermeneutics', in: J. Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (London, 1980), p. 246.

See ch. 1 in this volume.

John Hejduk, *Victims* (London UK: Architectural Association, 1986).

Ibid., "Introduction," (pages not numbered).

Ibid.

John Hejduk, *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque* (London, UK and Montreal: Architectural Association and Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1992).

Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, I.D. Rowland and T. N. Howe Eds. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Book One, 28-32.

John Hejduk, *The Lancaster/Hanover Masque*, 13.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid. 73.